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DEALING WITH THE COLONIAL PAST

THE IMAGE OF THE BRITISH RULE IN INDIA IN 21ST CENTURY HINDI CINEMA

ABSTRACT

This paper is dedicated to reconstructing the image of the British colonial rule in India in modern Hindi cinema. The main stress in the analysis is laid upon the depiction of the political and cultural impact of the British rule on common Indian people, as well as the colonizers' attitude towards the independence movement. Consequently, the author intends to enquire, how movies made after 2000 – among which *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (2001), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005), *Water* (2005) and *Rang De Basanti* (2006) are given special attention – deal with the difficult colonial past from an over 50-year-long perspective. Moreover, the author explains, how modern Hindi cinema shapes Indian viewers' opinions on the British rule, intending to strengthen their patriotic feelings and national pride.

Key words: India, Bollywood, Colonization, British Raj

Although 70 years have passed since the declaration of India's independence, British colonial rule in India and its consequences are still an intriguing and controversial topic. One of the most important and influential spheres where discussions of the colonial period take place is Hindi commercial cinema, known informally as Bollywood – one of the largest film industries in the world. It is often considered to be India's national cinema, partly because Hindi movies are distributed throughout the subcontinent, though they are often dubbed into local languages¹. Contrary to common misconceptions, however, Hindi cinema does not hold hegemony², yet out of all cinema industries of India it is surely the most widely recognized and the most influential one, enabling a pan-Indian discourse³.

HINDI CINEMA AS A DISCOURSE VEHICLE

As Rachel Dwyer and Divia Patel observed in *Cinema India. The Visual Culture of Hindi Film* (2002), Hindi commercial cinema has become a part of Indian people's everyday life⁴. Statements regarding how much influence Hindi cinema has on Indian people's lives are probably best supported by the fact that even the Indian state itself pays great attention to the 'quality' of the movies, controlling it through censorship⁵. From an academic point of view, the role of the Hindi cinema industry in contemporary India cannot be overestimated either, since it (...) *exerts considerable cultural influence in India as it often both mirrors and mocks Indian society*⁶. In other words, as Samir Dayal put it, it is both 'mirror and lamp – reflecting <<Indianness>> back to Indians at home and abroad, but also shaping Indianness'⁷. Consequently, Hindi cinema might be to at least some extent perceived both as a mirror of common people's opinions (including their opinions on India's colonial history), and as one of the most important shapers of Indian citizens' views. It might be also claimed that Indian cinema is a locus classicus for the construction of Indian national and cultural identity – as the most commonly accessible form of entertainment, it explains what it means, or rather should mean, to

¹ R. Dwyer, D. Patel, *Cinema India. The Visual Culture of Hindi Film*, New Brunswick 2002, p. 8.

² R. Vasudevan, "The Meanings of 'Bollywood'", in R. Dwyer, J. Pinto (eds.), *Beyond the Boundaries of Bollywood. The Many Forms of Hindi Cinema*, New Delhi 2012, p. 16.

³ R. Parciack, *Popular Hindi Cinema. Aesthetic Formations of the Seen and Unseen*, London 2016, p. 9.

⁴ R. Dwyer, D. Patel, *Popular Hindi Cinema...*, p. 8.

⁵ L. Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruptions. Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*, London 2002, p. 20.

⁶ D. Hasan, "Talking Back to 'Bollywood': Hindi Commercial Cinema in North-East India", in S. Banaji (ed.), *South Asian Media Cultures. Audiences, Representations, Contexts*, London 2011, p. 29.

⁷ S. Dayal, *Dream Machine. Realism and Fantasy in Hindi Cinema*, Philadelphia 2015, p. 1. As Dayal explains, Indian movies are actually based on an interplay between the reflection of everyday life – however exaggerated or deformed it might seem – and the production of fantasies and ideals. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

be an Indian⁸. As a result, to an average Indian, Hindi cinema remains probably one of the main sources of information about India's colonial history, if not the primary one⁹.

This essay is dedicated to reconstructing the image of British rule in modern Hindi cinema. It is inquired whether some general patterns – in depicting British and Indian people, as well as assessing British rule's influence on India's development – can be found in the 21st century movies. Among these, *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (2001), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005), *Water* (2005) and *Rang De Basanti* (2006) are given special attention. Moreover, the author inquires whether – on the basis of how those movies depict the British rule – a specific narrative on British colonialism can be identified in modern Hindi cinema, and whether Hindi cinema as such may be treated as a tool of Indian postcolonial discourse. It is also examined how those movies approach the issue of Indianness, and how they get involved in Indian national identity-building process.

INDIAN PROTAGONISTS, BRITISH ANTAGONISTS

The analysis of the British rule's image in modern Hindi cinema starts with *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (2001), a movie directed by Ashutosh Gowariker and nominated for the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film. *Lagaan's* action takes place during 1893 in a village called Champaner in northern India. Year by year, the villagers pay a tax called *lagaan* which supports the British administration and army. This time, however, the British make an extraordinary deal with the villagers – if the villagers beat them at a cricket match, they will be exempted from paying *lagaan* for three consecutive years; if they lose, they will have to pay a triple *lagaan* this year.

There is no doubt that Bhuvan, a young man from the village, becomes a symbol of resistance against the British. While everyone else seems shocked and scared, wanting to beg the British to cancel the bet, Bhuvan believes that accepting the Englishmen's challenge is an opportunity to keep, for the first time in their lives, all the crops which result from their hard work. Consequently, it might be claimed that Bhuvan symbolically shows how the whole of India should act – confronting the British with faith in God's help, bravely opposing humiliation and exploitation.

Another film which is worth referring to in this context is *Rang De Basanti* (2006), which ably combines parallel stories from the 1920s and 2000s¹⁰. With the help of her

⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

⁹ Traditionally, it is believed that the British took control over India as a result of the battle of Plassey in 1757, however, it must be stressed that it is a purely symbolic date. The British arrived in India in the beginning of the 17th century as merchants, clerks and soldiers of the British East India Company. With time, India turned into a political and administrative 'patchwork' – some of its territories got under direct control of the Company, while some others were ruled indirectly through loyal maharajas. The sepoy mutiny in 1857-1858 shook the foundations of the British rule in the subcontinent. As a result, the British crown took direct control over India. This decision marks the beginning of the so-called British Raj (literally: British Rule) which lasted until India gained independence in 1947.

¹⁰ According to M.K. Raghavendra, *Rang De Basanti* was probably the first Hindi commercial movie which pushed romance to the background and focused on political issues. M.K. Raghavendra, *The*

Indian friend, Sonya, a young British filmmaker employs five men to play the roles of Indian revolutionaries – Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhar Azad, Ashfaqullah Khan, Rajguru and Ramprasad Bismil¹¹. Although at the very beginning most of them treat acting as nothing more than good fun, they soon start to understand the meaning of the revolutionaries' sacrifice. Everything changes dramatically when Sonya's fiancée, Ajay, dies in a MIG-21 crash caused by the machine's technical problems – a result of the corruption of Minister Shastri and his colleagues, who bought cheap and poorly made machine parts. In a desperate attempt to bring justice, Sonya's friends kill Shastri. After the Minister is proclaimed a national hero, they take the All India Radio station by force and tell the whole truth to the country during the broadcast. Despite the fact they are ready to surrender and take the consequences of their actions by going to prison, they are all shot dead on the spot by an antiterrorist squad.

Out of all the movies analyzed in this essay, *The Rising* seems to be the richest source of information on how Indian people perceive the British rule from today's perspective. It is a story about Mangal Pandey, a sepoy from the 34th Bengal Native Infantry regiment of the British East India Company. The movie shows how his resistance – and how his hatred – towards the Company grew, through small yet very brave actions, until the moment he stood up as a leader of his cantonment's rebellion. As a viewer may learn from the film, his public execution became a trigger of a national uprising, which later became known as the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. It is also worth noticing, that in all three movies mentioned above a main role was played by Aamir Khan, who, as Manisha Basu observes in reference to his playing impact, (...) *seemed to have wholeheartedly given himself to the world of historical/biographical films, films of empire, and patriotic films, his increasingly conscious sacrificial screen persona thus becoming a further testimonial of authority to the call for martyrdom* (...) ¹².

While in all three movies the main Indian characters are depicted as true heroes, or even as Übermenschen, the British rule and the British people themselves are presented in a rather bad light. Whereas *Lagaan's* Bhuvan is the bravest Indian in the village and an initiator of the resistance movement, Captain Andrew Russell represents the worst

Politics of Hindi Cinema in the New Millennium. Bollywood and the Anglophone Indian Nation, New Delhi 2014, pp. 43-44.

¹¹ Ramprasad Bismil, Ashfaqulla Khan and Chandrashekhar Azad became especially known for the Kakori Case, a train robbery which took place on 9 August 1925, during which they planned to steal some money for their anti-British activity. Additionally, Azad and Bhagat Singh formed the Hindustan Socialist Revolutionary Association, whose aim was to give India independence and develop the country based on socialist principles. Contrarily to Gandhi's followers, they used violent means – Azad and Singh planned to assassinate the superintendent of police, James A. Scott, whom they blamed for the death of another freedom fighter. In the end, however, they accidentally killed assistant superintendent, mistaking him for Scott. O. Gupta, *Encyclopaedia of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, vol. 3, New Delhi, p. 479, and I.D. Gaur, *Martyr as Bridegroom. A Folk Representation of Bhagat Singh*, New Delhi 2008, p. 16.

¹² M. Basu, "Rang De Basanti: The Solvent Brown and Other Imperial Colors", in R.B. Mehra, R.V. Pandharipande (eds.), *Bollywood and Globalization. Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora*, London 2011, p. 99.

features one can even imagine. He is an egoistic, arrogant man, devoid of empathy and compassion. A conflict between Indian and British values is symbolized by the differences between Russell's and Bhuvan's behavior. It is also worth mentioning that it is Russell who is responsible for the whole cricket bet – in a sadistic way, he tells a local *raja* that since he didn't want to eat a piece of meat, the villagers would have to pay a double *lagaan* for the year. As he openly declares, eating meat had obviously nothing to do with the taxes – he simply wanted to force *raja* to break his religious rules.

However, it must be observed that Russell's power is not unlimited. When Russell's superiors in the British headquarters discover what he did, they become absolutely furious. They fear that soon all the provinces will demand a cricket match and a chance to lift the *lagaan* for a couple of years, which would surely lead to chaos and disobedience. Consequently, they declare that in the case of a British loss, Russell would have to pay the triple *lagaan* from his own pocket, and that he would be transferred to central Africa. As a result, a viewer might get the impression that Russell's actions were somewhat unusual for British officers and administrators, thereby casting British rule in a slightly more favorable light than Russell himself.

An even more negative image of British colonial rule can be found in *The Rising*. Lord Canning, the Governor General of India, stresses with pride that the British had become India's rulers by the grace of God, and that they shall therefore take the burden of the white man¹³ without complaints¹⁴. In that context, the true face of the East India Company – as presented in the movie – seems even more shocking. Paradoxically, the brutality and greediness of the Company are revealed by a British officer, Captain William Gordon, who compares the organization to Ravana, a ten-headed¹⁵ demon from the Hindu epos *Ramayana*.

In some scenes the feeling of British people's superiority over Indians is quite overwhelming. Not only sepoys, who often fight against their own countrymen, are brutally exploited. Even an Indian wet nurse is forced to put some opium lotion on her breasts in order to make her own baby fall asleep, since all the milk she had was drunk by an Englishwoman's child whom she takes care of. Some of the most striking proof for racial inequality might be found in a scene where an Indian waiter accidentally pours champagne on a British woman. The moment he tries to touch her with a napkin, Officer Hewson drags him out of the building and starts beating him, calling him a 'black dog,' and shouting about how he dared to touch a white woman. In another scene, when Gordon tries to stop Hewson from beating Pandey, Hewson accuses him of not being a real white man, which can be interpreted as a metaphorical equation

¹³ It is a clear reference to a term coined by Rudyard Kipling in his famous poem *The White Man's Burden*. See: R. Kipling, *Gunga Din and Other Favorite Poems*, New York 1990, pp. 52-53.

¹⁴ However, religious motifs and civilization mission which became so popular among the British living in India in the second half of the 19th century, do not often appear in the movie; the film concentrates instead on depicting the Company as a brutal force meant purely for making profits.

¹⁵ Depending on a version of the myth in regional interpretations, Ravana may have up to one thousand heads, although he is usually depicted with only ten. W.L. Smith, "Rāmāya'a Textual Traditions in Eastern India", in M. Bose (ed.), *The Rāmāya'a Revisited*, New York 2004, p. 91.

between unconditional support for fellow officers and belonging to white race and civilization.

Rang De Basanti shows the evil face of British rule in retrospections, going back to life and death of Indian revolutionaries, some of whom joined the movement to take revenge for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Historically speaking, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was a result of the introduction of *Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act* (commonly known as *Rowlatt Act*¹⁶) on 21 March 1919, a new law which significantly limited the basic civil rights (such as the freedom of assembly and the right to a fair trial). One of the Indian people's protests took place on 13 April 1919 – thousands of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs gathered in a park called Jallianwala Bagh near the Golden Temple in Amritsar. General Reginald Dyer ordered his soldiers to block the gate and open fire. Hundreds of people got trapped and died from bullet wounds, were trampled to death, or drowned in the well. The fire did not stop until soldiers ran out of ammunition.

The Jallianwala Bagh massacre is dramatically depicted in *Rang De Basanti*. Reginald Dyer commands his soldiers to open fire upon people who desperately try to escape, climbing the walls or jumping into a deep well. The scene's dramatism is strengthened by a picture of a screaming child, standing on a pile of dead bodies. As it is explained, it was the massacre that provoked Indians – originally nonviolent people – to grab the guns and start a revolutionary movement.

The Jallianwala Bagh motif comes back once again. While one of the Delhi students is sleeping, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre is shown in a sort of dream sequence. This time, however, the moment Reginald Dyer appears, he is quickly replaced by Minister Shastri, who personally orders opening fire towards the crowd, and directly points at pilot Ajay. Finally, when Ajay gets killed, Minister Shastri presses his hands together and says 'Jai Hind' ('Victory to India'), which only emphasizes his hypocrisy. A general message from this scene is as follows: decades ago it was the British who exploited and oppressed common people in India; now they have been replaced by corrupted, greedy politicians. Consequently, there is no fundamental difference between those two – politicians act as if they are actually murdering true Indian patriots with their own hands.

BREAKING STEREOTYPES

Although the British are presented in all of those three movies in a rather negative way, it is important to observe that there are some noteworthy exceptions. *Lagaan's* Russell and his cricket team members seem to be balanced by Elisabeth, Russell's sister. Touched by the Indian villagers' misery, she chooses to single-handedly start helping them, teaching them how to play cricket. Moreover, she is tolerant and open-minded

¹⁶ U.K. Singh, "Penal Strategies and Political Resistance in Colonial and Independent India", in K. Kanabiran, R. Singh (eds.), *Challenging the Rule(s) of Law. Colonialism, Criminology and Human Rights in India*, New Delhi 2008, p. 235.

– she starts learning Hindi¹⁷, takes part in religious celebrations, and most importantly, treats every Indian as an equal human being. Apart from Elisabeth, some British officers make quite a good impression as well, especially when they cheer up the villagers during the game, clearly appreciating their efforts and admiring truly good shots. Nevertheless, the general image of the British colonizers seems rather negative – regardless of their temporary support for the villagers, they are perceived as foreign usurpers who should leave India and go back to their own motherland.

It is worth noticing that *The Rising* is actually as much a story of Mangal Pandey as of Captain William Gordon. Despite racial and cultural differences, Pandey and Gordon become friends: they fight in a friendly wrestling competition, drink *bhang* and walk together in the night, singing soldier songs. However, Gordon is much more than just a friend of Pandey – he has his own beliefs, morality, honor and wisdom. This is probably the reason why he is often criticized, and sometimes even openly neglected by his commanders. While it would be an exaggeration to call him an outcast, he is surely a kind of black sheep. He is looked down on because of his faith (contrarily to his Anglican superiors, he is a Catholic) and his lack of a higher education. Nevertheless, nothing seems to irritate his commanders more than his critical attitude towards the Company and his honesty in revealing the Company's sins. In other words, he serves as a sort of voice of conscience from within – it is Gordon who explains why the slavery system is useful for the Company and how the whole opium trade system works. As a result, it is a British officer who, paradoxically, reveals a sad and brutal truth about the Company. Nonetheless, it is hard to deny that Gordon is just an exception in the mass of greedy, brutal and prejudiced administrators from the East India Company.

Although the Company is depicted in *The Rising* in a bad light, it does not mean that the movie unequivocally and one-sidedly praises India and Indians. There is no doubt that the practice of *sati*¹⁸ is one of Indian culture's elements openly condemned in the film. With the help of Pandey, Gordon rescues a young widow forced to enter a funeral pyre and gives her shelter at his own house. Later, he bravely defends her from numerous attempts of kidnapping, and even killing by her late husband's family. In this case, paradoxically, an Englishman's morality seems rightly superior to Indian tradition.

Although the *sati* tradition is clearly condemned in the movie, the situation of the Dalits – or the so-called untouchables, to use the politically incorrect term – seems much more complicated. It is a street sweeper who calls Pandey untouchable, based on the fact that the sepoy cracked the cartridges made of pork and beef, introduced together with the new rifle by the British. When Mangal discovers that the untouchable sweeper was right, he starts considering himself as someone who broke basic religious

¹⁷ Andrew Russell speaks fluent Hindi as well, but this ability seems to serve only as a useful tool for controlling Indian subjects, whereas Elisabeth learns a new language in order to talk to the villagers and be able to help them.

¹⁸ It is worth remembering that *sati* is actually a state of a woman who becomes 'virtuous' by entering her husband's funeral pyre. Commonly, however, this term has been used to describe the procedure or tradition itself. L. Harlan, *Religion and Rajput Women. The Ethic of Protection in Contemporary Narratives*, Berkeley 1992, p. 115.

rules and consequently lost his own caste identity. However, his army friends fully support him and deliberately touch his shoulders, claiming that since he had not been aware of the cartridges' composition, he did not commit any sin. Nevertheless, nothing is said about fighting with the injustice of the caste system itself – even though Pandey admits everyone in India was untouchable under the British rule, it is the street sweeper who remains truly untouchable in political, as well as social and religious terms.

A sort of Indian self-criticism is also presented in the case of a merchant who tried to sell opium on his own despite the Company's monopoly. Once he is accused of illegal actions by a British controller, he tries to bribe him and explains that giving 'gifts' was a natural practice in India. However, he soon changes his mind and manages to redeem himself – he breaks the Company's secret and shows to the sepoys how new cartridges are made, proving that previously he had only obeyed orders of another British officer. A similar redemption is presented by *Lagaan's* Lakha, who after a period of secret co-operation with the British, regrets his treason, is given a second chance and shares the villagers' final success.

Speaking of breaking some clichés in perceiving British rule by Indian filmmakers, another movie – *Water*, an Indo-Canadian production directed by award-winning Deepa Mehta – is worth referring to. It is interesting to observe that the film is more critical about acclimation to the British rule than about the British rule itself. A young man named Narayan returns to Calcutta (the present days' Kolkata), the capital of British India, having completed his law studies. Although he plans to work in colonial administration, he is truly devoted to the Gandhian movement. From this essay's perspective, however, the most intriguing aspect of the film is the behavior of Indians who got fully used to the British rule, and did not intend to change it. In this context Rabindra, Narayan's friend, is worth special attention. He seems to be completely indifferent to the whole Gandhian movement and Narayan's active support. He openly declares he likes 'English ways', including cricket, whiskey, playing the piano – he even seems to prefer English poets like Byron and Shakespeare to Indian ones. Narayan cannot stop himself from mocking Rabindra, calling him a 'real brown sahib'. To some extent, Rabindra resembles Rudyard Kipling's Hurree Babu, a Bengali who aspired to become a member of the Royal Society so much that he tried to be more British in his actions and opinions than the British themselves, and who nonetheless, as might be interpreted from Kipling's novel, could never become a real sahib¹⁹. As Martha Nussbaum observes harshly, by misquoting Shakespeare and singing Shubert off-key, Rabindra turns the tragic relationship between Indian elites and the British into a silly cartoon²⁰. It must be stressed, however, that Narayan is not a total contradiction of Rabindra – he does not thoughtlessly praise the whole of Indian culture, as Rabindra does with the British one. Narayan criticizes Hindu people's attitude towards widows, stressing that in this particular case, the equal treatment of married and widowed women in British culture

¹⁹ Compare with: R. Kipling, *Kim*, London 2000.

²⁰ M.C. Nussbaum, "Review", in eadem, *Philosophical Interventions. Reviews 1986-2011*, New York 2012, p. 355.

was right, whereas the old Hindu tradition of sending widows to ashrams and making their lives miserable should have been abandoned.

Rabindra is not the only character in the movie who supports the old, British system. Paradoxically, the others who support it and fear the upcoming Gandhian order are Madhumati, an old head of the ashram, and Gulabi, a *hijra* – in other words, the people who suffered the most from the old, traditional system. Despite being neglected and having a very low social position, they seem to like it, since they have already managed to make their lives a little bit less miserable than those of other ashram's inhabitants – they force a young, beautiful widow to prostitution, so that she could support the ashram financially and, above all, enable Gulabi and Madhumati to buy sweets and cannabis.

Despite the fact that British law gave Hindu widows the right to remarry, a traditional order based on inequality and discrimination has been conserved by people like Gulabi and Madhumati. Paradoxically then, people who should anticipate a social revolution the most, do not want any changes; they do not wish for liberation for widows, nor do they crave for equality which would include fair treatment of the Dalits – one of Gandhi's flagship ideas, which makes Gulabi and Madhumati feel disgusted.

INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT AND HISTORICAL (IN)ACCURACY

A pro-independence motif appears to be the most important feature of Hindi historical movies. In the first film analyzed in this essay, resistance against injustice caused by a double *lagaan* seems to evolve into a sort of 'Quit India' campaign. Anti-British emotions are very much visible, especially in the song *Chale Chalo*, which accompanies villagers preparing for the cricket match: *He that rules is a tyrant. He that has destroyed us his home is the West. We shall make sure he will not remain.*

It is the arrogant and provocative behavior of the British that makes the villagers fight with constant humiliation and disrespect – after all, how long could they stand beatings, being called 'darkies', and threats that they would be shot dead because of any minor disobedience? Even Ram Singh, a loyal servant of the administrators, finally takes off his turban, symbolically refusing to serve the British anymore. In the end, the Indian team wins the match – the cantonment in Champaner is dissolved, and all the soldiers move to another quarter, as though symbolically leaving India. Even the so long awaited monsoon comes, finishing the drought and bringing a happy end.

Despite numerous motifs appearing in *The Rising*, it is surely the mutiny itself that makes up the core of the whole plot. When Pandey discovers that rumors about the consistence of new cartridges were true, he confronts Gordon and declares they are not brothers anymore. 'You enjoyed the black man's loyalty, now you taste his fury!', says Pandey, and after being assured by his fellow sepoys the incident with cartridges did not turn him into an outcast, he starts intensifying his anti-British activity. Finally, it is Pandey who causes the outbreak of the mutiny much earlier than it had been planned.

Once British troops from Rangoon arrive, Pandey opens fire towards British officers, and when he realizes he would not escape, tries to commit suicide.

After Pandey wakes up in a hospital, he has a very honest and insightful conversation with Gordon. He declares without a moment of hesitation that he would touch the grease a hundred times if that gave him freedom – consequently, getting rid of foreign rulers and becoming independent is clearly prioritized over religious matters. Pandey's patriotism is highlighted once again when, being begged by Gordon to stop all the madness, he says: 'India is rising', using the word 'India' instead of 'Hindustan' for the first time. As a result, the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 is depicted as the first fight for modern, independent India.

During the trial, Pandey refuses to answer any questions and accepts the officers' verdict with a meaningful silence²¹. Afterwards, Mangal's public execution becomes a trigger of a national uprising. Although not much attention is paid to what happened after the initiation of the mutiny, the film ends with a very specific summary. The narrator states: *And so began the bloodiest rebellion in human history. The British called it the Sepoy Mutiny, but for Indians it was the First War of Independence (...). The Rebellion was finally put down after a year but it destroyed the East India Company, and the British crown took over the governance of India. Mangal Pandey in his death became a hero, a legend who inspired a nation to fight for freedom. The dream of freedom ignited by Mangal finally came true 90 years later on the 15th of August 1947 when India became free.*

Firstly, it is impossible not to notice that the narrator goes smoothly from the Sepoy Mutiny to Indian independence, jumping over almost one hundred yearlong gap or, rather, connecting those two events as if the latter was a direct consequence of the former. A viewer might get an impression that Mahatma Gandhi, who is shown in documentary material supplementing the narrator's commentary, directly inherited the ideals and spirit of Mangal Pandey. That kind of impression could not be more deceiving – after all, it is difficult not to see some fundamental differences between 'filmy' Pandey's desire for blood and sacrifice, and Gandhi's *satyagraha*.

Secondly, the narrator's summary distorts the truth about the mutiny's real character and consequences. Contrary to what the movie shows, Indian kings and leaders such as Lakshmi Bai, Nana Sahib or Tatyá Tope had their own, particular interests, and did not manage to cooperate. It also has to be remembered, that the Sepoy Mutiny did not spread across the entire subcontinent – most of its territories remained neutral, or even openly loyal to the Company.

Thirdly, both the summary, as well as the whole movie, depict Mangal Pandey as a freedom fighter, who dreamt of a modern, independent India. Based on historical sources, it is hard to attribute such ambitions to him – it is much more probable that his rebellion had purely religious meaning. In other words, as a *Brahmin*, he could not stand the idea of using cartridges made of pig and cow grease, and did not really think

²¹ It must be observed that during the authentic trial Pandey tried to defend himself by saying he had been under the influence of *bhang*. K.A. Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857. Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising*, Witney 2010, p. 87.

about his actions' consequences on a nationwide scale. It also seems dubious that the real Mangal Pandey had such an influence on the mutiny's outbreak. Taking all these factors into account, it is hard to call the 1857 rebellion the First Indian War of Independence²², as is suggested in the movie. However, in defense of the filmmakers, it is worth observing that the film does capture the authentic 'gap in knowledge', as Jill C. Bender puts it²³, between the Company and Indian society – of all the British characters, only William Gordon seems to understand the complexities of the whole British-Indian conflict, including its religious and cultural roots.

From this essay's perspective, the most important elements of *Rang De Basanti* are the parallels between the lives of young students from Delhi University and the sacrifice of the 1920s revolutionaries. As it is explained in the movie, Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad are believed to have invented the phrase *Inquilab zindabad* ('Long live the revolution') which became a motto of the whole anti-imperial movement in India. It is also worth noting that they all call themselves 'revolutionaries' (*krantikari*), not 'rebels', which makes them look like patriotic martyrs, not bloodthirsty terrorists. It seems that a general message of the movie is quite clear: the fight taken up against the British rulers has to be continued – this time, however, it is aimed at corruption, nepotism and the brutality of India's political elite.

The British rule is depicted in a very negative way. Similarly to the Company's image in *The Rising*, British Raj might be metaphorically compared to the evil Ravana, whose burning head falls down the moment the British are about to arrest Azad. However, the image of the British filmmaker's grandfather, James McKinley, who was a jailer and kept a diary about the imprisoned revolutionaries, is not as bad as the image of the British rule itself. He is absolutely distressed by tortures and humiliation of the Indian prisoners, and in his prayers he asks Christ for mercy. McKinley is then depicted as a mere cog in a huge machine of the Empire, and is not to be blamed for revolutionaries' misery – after all, as one of them tells him directly, he was only fulfilling his duties.

The movie's attitude towards violence seems ambivalent. On the one hand, violence is treated as a natural reaction against oppression and injustice, whether it is about killing the Minister for his corruption, or fighting back the police who attack a peacefully protesting crowd. On the other hand, however, Delhi students openly admit that by assassinating the Minister they committed a sin, and therefore they were ready to go to prison. However, the price they pay for letting the entire country know the truth about the MIG crash turns out to be incomparably higher – just like the 1920s revolutionaries, they die as martyrs fighting oppression and injustice.

²² One of the most influential voices supporting the view that the mutiny was in fact the war of independence was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's *The Indian War of Independence* published in 1909. Savarkar set a basic pattern for patriotic writers in India, depicting the mutiny as a well-planned, revolutionary war against evil British rulers. S.P. MacKenzie, *Revolutionary Armies in the Modern Era. A Revisionist Approach*, New York 1997, p. 96.

²³ J.C. Bender, *The 1857 Indian Uprising and the British Empire*, Cambridge 2016, p. 7.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The strength of India, as a viewer might interpret from the movies, lies in the unity of its people, regardless of caste and religion. An allegory of the Indian nation can definitely be found in *Lagaan*'s village, which encompasses all religions and castes of Indian society and, as Dirk Wiemann points out in the last paragraph of his analysis, realizes on the one hand Gandhi's ruralist ideal, and on the other – Nehru's dream of modernization²⁴. This ideal is perfectly captured in the case of Kachra, a Dalit, who after being finally accepted by the villagers because of Bhuvan's 'social campaign', takes part in their team's victory. Another good example is the vision of a unity between Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs – the last group being represented by Deva, a former soldier, who openly declares he hated the British. It seems that Deva is somehow denying a traditional image of the Sikhs – it cannot be forgotten that Sikhs eagerly served in the British army (and were appreciated by the British, since they were considered as one of the so-called martial races), and generally did not join the Sepoy Mutiny. The case of Sikhs' loyalty is probably deliberately omitted in *The Rising*; instead, the filmmakers underline the unity of all religions and classes – whether it is about common soldiers or great leaders and kings, they all eagerly join the rebellion.

Similarly to *The Rising*, *Rang De Basanti* also promotes tolerance and unity between people of various religions. It can be best described on the example of Lakshman and Aslam – a metaphorical representation of tense relations between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary India. Lakshman Pandey²⁵, who later joined the students and helped them to capture the radio station, used to be a member of a right wing party which openly encouraged its followers to use violence against everything they considered non- or anti-Hindu. Aslam's situation had been equally problematic – his family claimed that India had never accepted them, Muslims, as its own people, and would prefer Aslam to only befriend Muslims. Finally, however, tolerance and unity triumph, as Lakshman leaves his party and bravely defends Aslam from a brutal attack of the police during anti-government protests.

However, claiming that all films analyzed in this essay simply glorify tolerance and equality seems far too shallow. The question remains, whether those movies promote actual equality and partnership between people of various religions – mainly Hindus and Muslims – or whether religious minorities are intended to be merely tolerated by a Hindu majority and kept under a dominant position of Hinduism. Such a conclusion might be derived from *Lagaan*, where all villagers, regardless of their religion, pray to Lord Krishna for help and watch a performance about Krishna and Radha's love story from Hindu mythology. However, as Giacomo Lichtner and Sekhar Bandyopadhyaya state in their article, 'it is not a specific religion, but rather religiosity, which is central in

²⁴ D. Wiemann, "Teaming Multitudes – *Lagaan* and the Nation in Globality", in A. Bartels, D. Wiemann (eds.), *Global Fragments. (Dis)Orientation in the New World Order*, Amsterdam 2007, p. 156.

²⁵ It might not be coincidental that Lakshman's surname is Pandey, just like in the case of Mangal Pandey.

*Lagaan*²⁶. This would be compatible with examples from two other movies – it seems that Hindu culture's dominance is not equally strong in *The Rising* (in which all sepoys take part in some Sufi celebrations) and *Rang De Basanti*, which shows how all main characters go for prayers to the Golden Temple. It might then be claimed that relations between particular religious groups and classes in Indian society are much more diverse and nuanced than the behavior of the British themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems that British colonial rule is presented in modern Hindi cinema in a rather negative way – British officers and administrators are arrogant, devoid of empathy and compassion, and led by hubris and greediness. However, among brutal and narrow-minded Englishmen, there is always a positive exception which is supposed to introduce some balance and defend the filmmakers from accusations of being one-sided and promoting stereotypes and prejudices – for example, Pandey's officer friend, a lady who teaches the villagers how to play cricket, and a young filmmaker and granddaughter of a British officer, who is so much fascinated by India and its history that she wants to make a documentary film depicting bravery and martyrdom of Indian freedom fighters. Nevertheless, it seems crucial that a negative image of British rulers aims at stressing patriotism, bravery and unity of Indian people, making anticolonialism one of many – but surely not the only – feature of Indianness. The only film which tells about those Indians who enjoyed or were particularly interested in maintaining British order is Mehta's *Water*. Other films introduce a clear division between the British and Indians – even those who seem to support the British either realize that they should fight for common good, or get so mistreated by their masters that they leave them and join the rebels voluntarily.

It is also worth stressing that in the films such as *The Rising* and *Lagaan* the real enemy comes from outside. Even *Rang De Basanti* follows the same pattern – although it seems that contemporarily the biggest enemy of the Indian people are corrupted politicians, a comparison with British officers has a clear message: they do live in India, but they have a different mentality and ethics, and therefore do not seem (and do not deserve) to be a part of Indian nation. This interpretation seems to justify the murder committed by the students. After all, as it might be interpreted, they did not kill their brother or fellowman – they fought with a real, outer enemy (in moral, though not in geographical terms).

Moreover, it must be observed that all movies analyzed in this essay promote activeness, which seems fully concordant with Gandhi's ideas. However, *The Rising* and *Rang De Basanti* are far from praising pacifistically understood *ahimsa*, or non-violence, as it is known to the Western world. Even *Lagaan's* cricket match seems to be a metaphor of a fight, the only difference being sport rules and objective referees. Consequently, when

²⁶ G. Lichtner, S. Bandyopadhyay, "Indian Cinema and the Presentist Use of History: Conceptions of 'Nationhood' in *Earth* and *Lagaan*", *Asian Survey*, vol. 48, no. 3 (2008), p. 447.

all peaceful methods are ineffective, people not only can, but absolutely must grab the guns and spill some blood. In this case, Gandhian ideals become somehow much more vague and distant²⁷.

There is no doubt that the films analyzed in this paper cannot actually be labelled as historically accurate movies. Naturally, in that kind of entertainment a certain level of simplification and selectivity is inevitable, however, those movies – as it has been pointed out in the analysis – pick up some events and historical figures, and depict them or deliberately modify them so that they can serve nation-building purposes. Moreover, a particular, mythologized version of history is given to common viewers²⁸ in terms of both showing the British rule in a bad light, as well as promoting a positive image of Indians and Indian nation. The way the British rule is presented in modern Hindi cinema might be then treated as a case study of how the past has been used for nation-building purposes in postcolonial India – as Rachel Dwyer summed up: ‘The historical has always been closely linked to ideas of nationalism, and in India it has created new myths for the new nation by reinterpreting the past’²⁹.

Consequently, all movies analyzed in this essay seem to answer a question not really about the nature of the British rule, but about the identity of the Indians. It seems fully concordant with an observation made by Sumita S. Chakravarty, according to whom the most crucial feature of the Mumbai (and earlier Bombay) cinema is that its development alongside ‘India’s (high) nationalistic phase makes it an eminently contemporary mode of expression implicated in debates regarding national identity’³⁰. Movies such as *Lagaan*, *The Rising* and *Rang De Basanti* clearly reinterpret some 19th and 20th century events, and regardless of their actual meaning in historical context, turn them into nation-building symbols. In case of *Lagaan* and *The Rising*, a concept of a tolerant, multi-religious Indian society as we understand it today is shown in times when the very idea of Indian nation had not even existed. Moreover, freedom, dignity and *swaraj* (self-governance) seem superior to every single Indian person’s particular religious, social and ethnic identity. Whether religiousness as such is an inherent element of Indianness, or whether all Indians might get united only under a protective umbrella of Hinduism and Hindu upper class culture, is another question which deserves a separate analysis.

²⁷ In fact, Gandhi and the 1920s revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad had totally different visions of the independence movement. Revolutionaries sentenced to death by the British were actually competing with Gandhi, whom their followers accused of deliberate ignorance and not rescuing the revolutionaries from the gallows. Consequently, after their execution Gandhi was welcomed by some young people at the Karachi train station with black flags and a slogan *Gandhi Mardabad* (‘Death to Gandhi’). S.D. Sharma, *India Marching. Reflections from a Nationalistic Perspective*, Bloomington 2012, p. 62.

²⁸ It might then be claimed that Hindi cinema takes part in what Roland Barthes called transforming history to nature thanks to myths – as Nandini Bhattacharya observed, Indian cinema might be treated as a mythology ‘whereby a political history of disjunctures is naturalized into a unitary ideology of the nation’. N. Bhattacharya, *Hindi Cinema. Repeating the Subject*, London 2013, p. 25.

²⁹ R. Dwyer, *Bollywood’s India. Hindi Cinema as a Guide to Contemporary India*, London 2014, p. 40.

³⁰ S.S. Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*, Austin 1993, p. 8.

In the end it is worth stressing once again, that Hindi cinema often not only acts in accordance with state-approved ideology, but also reflects thoughts and beliefs already present in Indian society. No matter which of those two mechanisms had more influence on movies' characters, however, the way those films try to deal with the image of the British rule, mainly omitting its positive or at least neutral elements, proves that colonialism and its role in Indian history are still – at least in Indian mentality – an unclosed chapter.

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